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ABSTRACT

A study examined whether intraceptive thinkers (those with a relatively complex and differentiated set of concepts for thinking about people) are more likely than projective thinkers (those who tend to think in simple stereotypes, and are biased and judgmental) to see the subtle religious themes in the poetry of Walt Whitman. Ninety-six male subjects participated, the first group consisting of 50 college freshmen and sophomores, and the second group consisting of 46 inmates at a county prison. Subjects were administered Hogan's Empathy Scale, which assesses intraceptive versus projective thinking, and the Whitman Poetry Questionnaire, which was constructed to measure accuracy of poetry interpretation. Correct interpretations were derived from Whitman scholar Gay Allen's (1957) illustrations of subtle mystical and pantheistic religious themes in Whitman's poetry. Incorrect interpretations were constructed to reflect either cliches from Judeo-Christian thought or common Judeo-Christian religious sentiments or emotional reactions. Subjects scoring high on the Empathy Scale (intraceptive thinkers) tended to perceive Whitman's subtle religious messages, while low scorers (projective thinkers) tended to give conventional interpretations to the poetry. (A table of correlations between the Whitman Poetry Questionnaire and Empathy Scales is included, and ten references are appended.) (MM)

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Projective and Intraceptive Styles of Poetry Interpretation

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Abstract

Ten passages of Whitman's poetry were presented to 50 college students and 46 prison inmates. Subjects who scored high on Hogan's Empathy scale (intraceptive thinkers) tended to perceive Whitman's subtle religious messages, while low scorers (projective thinkers) tended to project conventional interpretations onto the poetry.

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(1) Title of Paper: Projective and Intraceptive Styles of Poetry Interpretation

(2) Topical Session Preference: Cognitive Style, Educational Psychology, Personality Measurement

(3) Problem or Major Purpose:

Common knowledge to poetry instructors is that some students quickly perceive the intended meanings of poets, while other students experience great difficulty in getting beyond surface structure to the deeper levels of meaning in poetry. We would like to suggest that individual differences in the ability to perceive the deeper levels of meanings in poetry is a function of cognitive style. More specifically, we test whether persons with an intraceptive cognitive style will be better attuned to the meanings intended by poets than persons with a projective cognitive style.

Intraceptive thinkers have a "relatively complex and differentiated set of concepts for thinking about people" (Holt, 1969, p. 661), have literary and artistic interests, and are open, sensitive, and perceptive to others' intentions (Johnson & Worley, 1986). Projective thinkers, on the other hand, tend to think in simple stereotypes, are biased and judgmental, and tend to be poor judges of others. Our study examines whether intraceptive thinkers are more likely than projective thinkers to see the subtle religious themes in the poetry of Walt Whitman.

(4) Subjects:

Ninety-six male subjects volunteered to participate in the study. The first group consisted of 50 freshman and sophomore college students. The second group consisted of 46 inmates at the local county prison. The testing of the inmates

was part of a larger project dealing with the effectiveness of bibliotherapy in prisons (Johnson & Worley, 1986).

(5) Procedure:

Subjects were administered Hogan's (1969) Empathy Scale, which assesses intraceptive versus projective thinking, the Whitman Poetry Questionnaire, constructed for this study to measure accuracy of poetry interpretation, and a page on which subjects indicated their age, level of education, and religious preference.

Intraceptive vs. Projective Thinking. Evidence (Hogan, 1969; Greif & Hogan, 1973; Johnson, Cheek, & Smither, 1983) suggests that Hogan's Empathy Scale is one of the best available measures of empathic sensitivity--the ability to imaginatively place one's self in others' positions to perceive the world as they do. The Empathy Scale correlates substantially with social acuity, likability, communication competence, level of moral maturity, effective social functioning, sociopolitical intelligence, therapist effectiveness, effective parenting, freedom from anxiety, tendency to feel what others feel, and accuracy in person perception. Johnson et al. performed a factor analysis of the scale and found four unique factors. They labeled these factors Social Self-Confidence, Even Temperedness, Sensitivity, and Nonconformity. Of the four factors, Sensitivity and Nonconformity best discriminated between the high- and low-empathy groups in Hogan's original sample, and Johnson et al. suggest that these two factors best assess intraceptive thinking.

Accuracy of poetry interpretation. The Whitman Poetry Questionnaire (WPQ). consists of ten passages of poetry from Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass. Each passage is followed by two alternative interpretations. The "correct"

interpretations were derived from Whitman scholar Gay Allen's (1957) illustrations of subtle mystical and pantheistic religious themes in Whitman's poetry. The "incorrect" interpretations were constructed to reflect either cliches from Judeo-Christian thought or common Judeo-Christian religious sentiments or emotional reactions. A sample of one of the passages is presented below with its alternative interpretations and an explanation of each interpretation.[1]

I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then,
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass,
I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is sign'd by God's name,
And I leave them where they are, for I know that wheresoe'er I go,
Others will punctually come for ever and ever.

A. God made man in his own image.

B. God is in everything.

This passage ("Song of Myself," lines 1284-1288) reflects the mystical and pantheistic doctrine of signatures, seen also in the writings of Emerson, Goethe, and Carlyle (Allen, 1957, pp. 261-262). The notion of signatures states that every object in nature bears the imprint or sign of God; this makes "B" the correct answer. The parallel and more well-known Hebraic teaching appears in option "A."

Analyses. Total scores for accuracy of poetry interpretation were calculated by summing the number of correct responses on the WPQ. WPQ scores were correlated with the demographic variables (age, level of education) and

compared by analysis of variance across subject groups (student versus criminal) and religious affiliation. Finally, WPQ scores were correlated with the Empathy Scale and its factor subscales. Because empathy correlates positively with education level, both zero-order correlations and partial correlations, controlling for education level, were computed.

We predicted that persons scoring high on Empathy, particularly the Sensitivity and Nonconformity factors, would be more open to Whitman's unconventional religious themes and would choose the "correct" interpretation more often. Persons who score low on Empathy and its subscales, because they are religiously literalistic and conventional, were expected to project their feelings by choosing the "incorrect" (stereotypic) interpretations. Thus Empathy and its subscales should show positive correlations with WPQ scores.

(6) Results:

To determine whether using a total score on the Whitman Poetry Questionnaire was justified, an alpha reliability coefficient was computed for the total sample. The value of alpha was .37, which is quite low, yet not unexpected for a short projective measure. While it is inadvisable to use a scale with such low internal consistency for individual interpretation, it is possible to use such scales in statistical analyses of groups (Cheek, 1982).

Age and level of education did not correlate significantly with WPQ scores. Analyses of variance showed that differences in religious affiliation did not impact on WPQ responses and that total WPQ scores were not significantly different for the two groups of subjects.

Table 1 summarizes the relationships between WPQ scores and the Empathy, Social Self-Confidence, Even Temperedness, Sensitivity, and Nonconformity scores.

For the total sample, higher scores on the WPQ were associated with higher scores on Empathy, Even Temperedness, Sensitivity, and Nonconformity. The same pattern was found for the students considered alone. For the prisoners, higher scores on the WPQ were associated with higher scores on Empathy, Social Self-Confidence, and Nonconformity. Controlling for education, partial correlations show the same pattern of results, although the significance of the [redacted] relationships for the criminals was marginal (p's near .10). Overall, the results say that within both a normal and criminal population, we find that, as predicted, the more intraceptive individuals are more likely to perceive the subtler religious themes in Whitman's poetry, and the non-intraceptive individuals are more likely to project a conventional interpretation onto the items.

Insert Table 1 about here

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(7) Conclusions:

As predicted, high scorers on the Empathy Scale tended to imaginatively place themselves in a poet's shoes and intraceptively perceive the poet's intended meanings. Low scorers tended to project more conventional meanings onto the poetry passages. The Nonconformity factor of the Empathy Scale was the most robust factor subscale, predicting performance on the WPQ for both groups. This was expected, for high scores on the Nonconformity factor indicate both unconventionality (and therefore lower conventional religiosity) and also an open, intraceptive cognitive style. Recent research (Jensen & DiTiberio, 1984; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986) has shown that English instructors might be wise to consider cognitive style when they teach composition; the present research

indicates that poetry instructors might also wish to take into account the cognitive style of their students.

(8) References:

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Author Notes

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Footnotes

[1]A copy of the full Whitman Poetry Questionnaire is available from the author. The passage of Whitman's poetry in this paper is reprinted by permission of New York University Press from WALT WHITMAN: LEAVES OF GRASS, READER'S COMPREHENSIVE EDITION edited by Harold W. Blodgett and Scully Bradley. Copyright 1965 by New York University.

Table 1

Correlations between Whitman Poetry Questionnaire and Empathy Scales

Scale	Full and Partial Correlations[a] Criminals	Students	Total
Empathy Full Scale	27**	45****	35****
	20*	45****	34****
Social Self-Confidence	26**	00	12
	21*	00	10
Even Temperedness	04	38***	21**
	01	37***	19**
Sensitivity	03	29**	18**
	00	29**	18**
Nonconformity	25**	34***	29***
	18	33***	27***

[a]Decimals omitted from all correlation coefficients. Upper coefficient is zero-order correlation; lower coefficient is partial correlation, controlling for the effects of educational level.

*$p < .10$, **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$. ****$p < .001$.